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New Materialist Philosophy

Exploring the Promise of New Materialisms

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ABSTRACT Response to Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Shomura mediates upon the promise and possibilities that new materialisms affords in its attentiveness to the material.

In "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," Kyla Tompkins provides a fine critical overview of the still-emerging new materialism and its relation to established fields.¹ Through feminist, queer, and critical race theory, Tompkins offers correctives to new materialism that are especially important for those who share my background in political theory. Prominent strands of new materialism have been pioneered by political theorists such as Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost; Kathy Ferguson, Anatoli Ignatov, and Sharon Krause have also offered compelling engagements.² One may gain much from these rich accounts of matter and materiality yet remain uneasy over their turn away from if not marginalization of race, sexuality, and gender. When political theory learns more from feminist, queer, and critical race theory, its insights into new materialism may productively inflect the nature and conduct of cultural and American studies. In what follows, I draw upon such insights to extend Tompkins's account and to identify several other promising directions for new materialist studies.

"New Materialism" is an umbrella term for a broad range of scholarship that attends to matter as a key component of events, lives, and worlds. New materialists examine the materiality of humans and nonhumans alike. Oftentimes, they excavate bits of liveliness from what might seem to be most inert: rocks, machines, dead bodies . . . The generative force of matter is less an intrinsic property than a situated capacity. New materialists are thus fond of concepts like assemblage and ecology. They share a number of other common beliefs: the human is merely one form of being amongst others; no being necessarily bears more value than another; causality is not mechanistic but emergent; agency is slippery and distributed; and power slides across various spatiotemporal scales, from planetary and even cosmic terrains to the teeniest nooks and crannies of ordinary life.

New materialisms have been particularly helpful in addressing the crises instigated or intensified by anthropogenic climate change. Many hold that the parsing of life and matter throughout majoritarian Western thought has enabled the human to catalyze the ecological disasters of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. New materialisms reject fantasies of human mastery and affirm the entanglement of humans with nonhuman animals, vegetables, and minerals. They emphasize that, as artist and poet Jess X. Chen puts it, what we do to the earth is what we do to ourselves.³ New materialisms aid in the expansion of care and concern beyond the human as well.

At stake in the 'newness' of new materialisms is whether shifting configurations of matter are understood to be novel events, or late episodes and mutations of longer histories.⁴ "We need to always ask," Tompkins writes, "what is the heroic narrative that [new materialism's] putative 'newness' seeks to instantiate?"⁵ New materialism is often pitched as a reaction to the so-called "linguistic turn" in the humanities, when social constructivists and poststructuralists supposedly buried their noses into texts so deeply that they lost sight, scent, and touch of ink and browning pages. Tompkins rightly observes that new materialist critiques of representationalism often sweep away analyses of race, sex, and nation while dismissing them as "identity politics." In this way, new materialism suppresses different lived experiences of power to ontology, neglects the insights of feminist and queer theory as well as indigenous cosmologies, and stumbles when it comes to race. (I would add that Marxist responses find the vibrancy of things to be a symptom of commodification.⁶)

Tompkins offers feminist, queer, and critical race theory as correctives to new materialism. While agreeing with her criticisms, I propose that we also attend to work from those areas that serve as powerful counter-currents *within* new materialist studies. There are the creative refashionings of the materiality of race by Rachel Lee, Diana Leong, Jasbir Puar, Frances Tran, and, in his tricky project to "re-ontologize race" via notions of phenotype as dynamic and ecological, Arun Saldanha.⁷ There are the material feminisms of Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, and Elizabeth Wilson.⁸ There are rich new materialisms in queer theory as well, such as Lee Edelman's turn to mechanization in the death drive, Jack Halberstam's provocative work on "the wild," José Esteban Muñoz's untimely project on the brown commons, and various queer inhumanisms found in a special issue of *GLQ* edited by Mel Chen and Dana Luciano.⁹ Finally, I have learned much from new materialist projects across these and other fields by emerging scholars such as Stephanie Erev, Jishnu Guha-Majumdar, Huan He, Heidi Hong, Quinn Lester, and Yuhe Faye Wong.¹⁰

These thinkers may not identify as new materialists, and describing them as such admittedly risks a fall into the woes of diversity initiatives within the neoliberal university. But locating their projects at the heart of new materialism underscores the elisions and shortcomings of new materialisms that presume so-called "minority studies" to be incapable of making contributions to theory; emphasizes that feminist, queer, ethnic, disability, and indigenous scholarship are vital to syllabi and literature reviews of new materialism; and insists that efforts to cultivate an ethics and politics of the reassembled human must address the sociopolitical and epistemological conditions that have differentiated humans and the humanities through the racialized, gendered, sexualized, colonialist, and ableist metaphysics of life and matter.

When new materialisms follow the examples I outlined above, they may assist cultural and American studies scholars, as Tompkins outlines, in undoing the subject and the human; interrogating liberal personhood; investigating bodily affect as an avenue toward political collectives; following the insights of ecological thought; and better discerning connections between structures of feeling, biopower, surveillance, and capital. Following Dana Luciano, Tompkins finds that the highest promise of new materialism lies in its calibration of the sensorial machinery that produces critique.¹¹

These are all valuable intellectual and political goals, yet the place of matter and materiality recedes in this part of Tompkins's account and in broader efforts to attune new materialism to biopolitical issues. Though matter proves to be a slippery thing, I have tried to keep it in view while conducting my major research projects on impasses to the good life and on shifting notions of the human, life, and time in the Anthropocene. This cultivated attunement has led me to slightly different avenues of new materialist inquiry

that may be productive for American and cultural studies.¹² The first is the discernment of matter as an extension or medium of racial, sexual, and colonial practices. Informed by new materialisms, cultural and American studies may track social, cultural, and political life through artifacts, plants, and animals. This approach may follow Mel Chen's invaluable expansion of intersectionality to demonstrate how materiality and animacy operate as crucial vectors of power alongside those of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and species.¹³ It may show how current theories of matter and materiality quietly turn upon sociopolitical histories that they disavow. This avenue of inquiry tends to innovate forms of politics that are not coordinated by agency and resistance, confined to the halls of consciousness, or in hot pursuit of subjectification.¹⁴

The second way is trickier because it dips into the treacherous waters of the ontological. If the previous route follows what is done *to and through* matter, this one asks what is done *by* matter? Does matter inflect the lived experience and politics of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and indigeneity, and, if so, *how* and *when*? Is the impact of matter reducible to the operations of ideology, structures of feeling, disciplinary practices, biopower, and governmentality? Or does it seem to have a force that exceeds those technologies of power? Tompkins rightfully disputes the new materialist separation of ontology from history while insisting that recourse to ontology often nullifies difference.¹⁵ But to shy away from the ontological may say more about the notion of ontology to which one subscribes than what problems may exist with ontology per se. While Tompkins and many feminist, queer, and critical race theorists dismiss ontology and view the idea of matter as lively to be a rather old, widely-shared story, many new materialisms, by foregrounding an ontology of matter, are able to question, among other things, the anthropocentrism that frames many intellectual projects.

Don't get me wrong; I too am wary of ontology, for rock-solid definitions of being have been the blunt objects of racist, sexist, ableist, colonialist, and imperialist powers. Fortunately, there are many rich examples of critical engagements with ontology that are grounded in politics rather than a universal truth: Monique Allewart's fascinating elaboration of a creolized ontology of slave and maroon life in the American colonial tropics; Donna Haraway's imaginative notion of the Chthulucene; Brian Massumi's pathbreaking work on affect and more recently on the ontopolitics of neoliberalism and neoconservatism; Elizabeth Povinelli's profound critique of the ontological presumptions underlying biopolitics in her recent *Geontologies*; Jasbir Puar's efforts to entangle intersectionality with assemblage; Kim TallBear's work at the intersection of indigenous thought, critical animal studies, and new materialism; and Anna Tsing's beautiful ethnography of matsutake mushroom as a hinge between ecology and political economy.¹⁶ From a different angle, Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton offer provocative understandings of antiblackness as a political ontology.¹⁷ One might discern a new materialist ontology in Mimi Thi Nguyen's compelling examination of how the animation of the hoodie by racial histories serves as a portal between human and thing.¹⁸ Finally, there is much to learn from Zakiyyah Jackson's compelling and rich pursuit of an antiracist, queer, decolonial metaphysics through the transvaluation of being.¹⁹


The sort of new materialist studies that I find most promising neither dogmatically insists on *one* ontology nor avoids making *any* ontological claims (both efforts tend to share the same rigid notion of ontology as declaring the truth of being). It develops a more modest understanding of ontology, perhaps what Jane Bennett calls an *onto-story*.²⁰ Onto-stories maintain an emphatically speculative air. They may enliven imaginative possibilities or deliver the suffocating sense that forms of power have been unyielding despite an abundance of minor changes and real alternatives every step of the way. This type of new materialist studies takes up the difficult labor of navigating multiple ontologies, amplifying

minor connections across racial, gender, species, and material lines in order to challenge the powers that be while offering positive visions of other worlds. Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noëne Silva exemplify this work when they, with great finesse, bridge Western posthumanism and Native Hawaiian cosmology to critique settler colonialism in Hawai'i and to sketch relationalities that are not anchored in Western man.²¹








Following the last direction and building on Tompkins's and Luciano's emphasis on the sensory, the third avenue pertains to critique. According to many new materialists, matter limits human understanding. If that is so, then how might we attend to the impacts and worldings of matter? Can nonanthropocentric thought ever issue from humans? How might critique proceed in the face of what escapes or even impedes analysis? Valuable courses through these thorny questions are found in the poetics of affect theory, especially in the work of Kathleen Stewart.²² For Stewart, ordinary life is an uneven terrain of near-happenings, stagnancy, and cascades of events. The intensities of whatever might or might not be underway place the senses on high alert for surprises, since the composition of a happening may be discerned only after the fact, and even then without full precision. That sort of sensory openness, which is cultivated in some new materialisms, may assist the navigation of archives, media, conversations, encounters, and the textures, dead ends, and byways of ordinary life. New materialisms help us tune in to the sometimes flat, sometimes fuzzy, sometimes painfully-sharp sense experiences that loom up around matter. Fidelity to matter may imbue critique with a valuable hint of messiness. It may lure cultural and American studies away from the seductive will to truth, away from drawing sharp images of the world for the purposes of hard-edged critique and toward welcoming bits of intuition, speculation, experiment, and open-endedness. It may furnish an ethos of "critical responsiveness," "presumptive generosity," and "agonistic respect," to borrow William Connolly's language.²³

Proceeding from the insistence that matter has always shaped our world may not alter much knowledge about race, gender, sexuality, ability, and indigeneity. Yet every now and then matter catches us off-guard, making a difference beyond our control. My wager is that the effects of matter will become increasingly difficult to ignore as the seas rise and swallow land masses, as weather patterns and storms become ever more erratic and destructive, as droughts intensify, and as ecosystems destabilize and even collapse with the mass extinction of species. Those who are already deeply precarious will be even more harshly affected, others will experience newfound hardship and loss, and new opportunities for connection, creativity, and care will arise. In this onto-story, matter will play a starring role in the transformations of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and indigeneity. New materialist studies that follow similar onto-stories may not only historicize sociopolitical formations but also anticipate what they could be becoming, for good and ill.

Notes

1. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-new-materialist-philosophy-tompkins/>. 
2. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Kathy Ferguson, "Anarchist Printers and Presses: Material Circuits of Politics," *Political Theory* 42, no. 4 (2014): 391–414; Anatoli Ignatov, "The Earth as a

Gift-Giving Ancestor: Nietzsche's Perspectivism and African Animism," *Political Theory* 45, no.1 (2016): 52–75. doi.org/10.1177/0090591716656461; and Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). 

3. Jess X. Chen, "Yellow, Black & Brown: On Colony Collapse," Ignite: Closing Plenary at Netroots Nation annual convention, 19 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwJEtG5u5Mo>. 
4. On temporalities of the event and of the episode, see Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 759–60. 
5. Tompkins, "On the Limits." 
6. For example, see Alexander R. Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 346–66. Jane Bennett discusses how the vibrancy of matter exceeds commodity fetishism in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 111–30. 
7. Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Diana Leong, "The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler's Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–35; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Frances H. Tran, "Animate Impossibilities: On Asian Americanist Critique, Racialization, and the Humanities" (PhD dissertation, CUNY Graduate Center, 2016); Arun Saldanha, "Re-ontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 9–24. 
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Object Politics: Or, What Objectification Allows” (paper presented at Humanisms and Its Prefixes conference, Berkeley, CA, October 3–4, 2015). [↗](#)

11. Tompkins, “On the Limits.” [↗](#)
12. Chad Shomura, “The Bad Good Life: On the Politics of Impasse” (PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2016), and Chad Shomura, “New Humanisms,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 1–2 (2016): 263–78. [↗](#)
13. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). [↗](#)
14. For example, see Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). [↗](#)
15. Tompkins, “On the Limits.” [↗](#)
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17. Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 1–47; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). [↗](#)
18. Mimi Thi Nguyen, “The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015), 791–816. [↗](#)
19. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Sense of Things,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–48. See also “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism,” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 669–85, and “Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement ‘Beyond the Human,’” *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 215–8. [↗](#)
20. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 160–1. [↗](#)
21. Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe K. Silva, “Sharks and Pigs: Animating Hawaiian Sovereignty against the Anthropological Machine,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 429–46. [↗](#)
22. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). [↗](#)
23. William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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